

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor Meeker and Members of City Council  
FROM: Raleigh Appearance Commission  
RE: Community Appearance Survey – Focus Group Phase  
DATE: March 6, 2007

The second phase of the Community Appearance Survey—a series of focus group discussion sessions—has now been completed and the findings tabulated. This effort was in complement to the previously-completed telephone survey phase. Both initiatives are aimed at ascertaining current citizen views concerning visual aspects of the City of Raleigh.

The results of the telephone survey were presented to Council by the Appearance Commission last year. Below is an overview of the focus group phase, summarizing the findings of the survey facilitator, the Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services (CUACS) of North Carolina State University. The Center's full report is attached.

### SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

#### **Raleigh's Overall Appearance**

Generally: Cited as good to very good in comparison to other cities.

Top assets: Green infrastructure (trees, parks, and greenways) and quality of life.

Chief concerns: Loss of trees, gateway corridor appearance, issues of visual identity.

#### **Most Positive Aspects of Raleigh's Appearance**

Features: Historic neighborhoods and buildings, street layout, streetscapes, green infrastructure.

Public standards: Signage regulation, graffiti mitigation, open space, development standards, tree preservation.

Places: Downtown, Glenwood South, colleges, art museum, major shopping and mixed-use centers, Dix property.

## **Most Pressing Appearance Issues**

Land and open space needs: Maintenance of streetscapes and parks; open space preservation, tree protection, low impact (drought-tolerant) landscaping.

Street and roadway needs: Unattractive gateway corridors (Capital Blvd., S. Saunders St., New Bern Ave., Glenwood Ave./ US 70 North, Hillsborough St., Hammond Road, Garner Rd.), litter mitigation, improving interconnectivity, street maintenance issues.

Residential and commercial development: Strip center appearances, mismatched residential infill, unattractive big box sites.

Other needs: Better public understanding of appearance policies, addressing unattractive sites and uses.

## **Most Attractive Places**

Cited for attractive design, quality maintenance, and/or mixed-use characteristics:

- Parks/greenways,
- Downtown area and adjacent neighborhoods,
- Educational/cultural settings,
- Certain shopping and entertainment areas (incl. Cameron Village, Glenwood South, North Hills, etc.), and
- Well-landscaped, well-maintained roadways (incl. Durant Rd., Glenwood Ave./St. Mary's St. inside the beltline, Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., etc.).

## **Least Attractive Places**

Cited for need of visual improvement and/or maintenance:

- Northern Capital Blvd.,
- Gateway corridors,
- Certain commercial areas (e.g., Capital Blvd./Wake Forest Rd. intersection, Crabtree Valley Mall area, area around NC State Fairgrounds, Glenwood Ave. coming into Raleigh)
- Certain mixed-use areas (e.g., sections of Atlantic Ave., Hillsborough St., and Garner Rd.), and
- Specific places (e.g., Amtrak and Greyhound stations, Central Prison)

## **Top Possible Appearance Improvement**

Strengthening enforcement of existing appearance and environment regulations.

Offering incentives to attract businesses downtown, raise architectural standards, beautify neighborhoods, etc.

Certain measures relating to appearance policies, the environment, infrastructure/safety, and various appearance-related initiatives.

## CONCLUSIONS

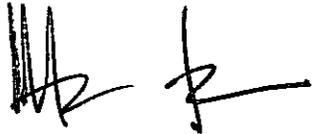
According to participants in the focus group sessions, Raleigh is doing a lot of things right. Concerns cited, however – specifically those related to urban design and maintenance matters – will merit future consideration.

## NEXT STEPS

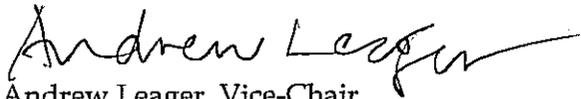
The final report on the survey project will explore similarities and differences between the focus group results and those of telephone survey. It will also outline possible demographic and locational correlations within the telephone survey results. The document will be offered in conjunction with presentation of the commission's Annual Report, in the early spring.

We thank you for the opportunity to present these findings.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mitch Fluhrer". The signature is stylized with a large initial "M" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Mitch Fluhrer, Chair  
Raleigh Appearance Commission

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Leager". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Andrew Leager, Vice-Chair  
Raleigh Appearance Commission

***Summary of Focus Group Discussions  
on the  
Appearance of the City of Raleigh***

***October 2006***

***Prepared by:***

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## **Executive Summary**

The Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services (CUACS) at North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh produced this report in association with the City of Raleigh Planning Department and Appearance Commission. This report provides information derived from a series of focus groups that were convened to discuss the appearance of the City of Raleigh. The focus groups were held in 2006 (see Appendix A) and included stakeholders from throughout the city who participated in discussions aimed at gathering opinions about Raleigh's appearance and related issues. Six major questions were addressed (see Appendix B).

The overall appearance of Raleigh was rated as good to very good in comparison to other cities visited or lived in by the vast majority of focus group participants. The most positive aspects of Raleigh's appearance were the downtown revitalization efforts and the variety of new residential and commercial developments in many parts of the city. The most pressing appearance issues identified were roads needing repair, trash along streets and roadways, unkempt street medians and sidewalk areas, and insufficient or unattractive landscaping along most gateways into the city.

Mixed-use characteristics, attractive design concepts, or apparent efforts at high quality maintenance were the primary reasons that several locations were identified as Raleigh's most attractive. Identified most often were the entire parks system and greenways, the State Government Complex, and Glenwood South, North Hills Mall, and Pilot Mills. The northern part of Capital Boulevard was identified as the least attractive location because of the strip malls, vehicular traffic, and sprawl. The single effort or initiative identified that would do the most to improve Raleigh's appearance while taking into account the balance between public/private value and cost was improving or strengthening enforcement of current regulations related to appearance issues and environmental preservation.

# **Summary of Focus Group Discussions on the Appearance of the City of Raleigh**

## **Introduction**

This report provides information collected in a series of focus groups that were convened to discuss the appearance of the City of Raleigh. The focus groups were facilitated by the Center for Urban Affairs and Community Services (CUACS) at North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh over several months in 2006 (see Appendix A) in association with Planning Department staff and the Appearance Commission of the City of Raleigh. Stakeholders from throughout the city participated in discussions aimed at gathering opinions about Raleigh's appearance and related issues. A total of 50 individuals participated in seven focus group sessions, and included: respondents to a related telephone survey conducted in 2005; Citizens Advisory Committee representatives; business leaders and advocates; parks and environmental advocates; urban designers, planners and architects; Raleigh Neighborhood College alumni; commercial and residential developers and realtors; and other interested citizens. Six major questions were addressed and the results of the discussions are presented in this report (see Appendix B).

## **Raleigh's Overall Appearance**

The overall appearance of Raleigh was rated good to very good by the vast majority of focus group participants in comparison to other cities visited or lived in. Many of the comments regarding overall appearance were repeated in many of the focus groups. Mentioned most often were the abundance of trees and greenery, beautiful parks, and the greenway system. However, concern was expressed for the increasing loss of trees and perceived lack of maintenance within the parks system and other areas. Focus group participants were also distressed by the poor appearance of the gateways into the city, trash along streets and major thoroughfares, the lack of attractive landscaping in many areas, the large number of strip malls, and urban sprawl.

There were some among the focus group participants who felt that Raleigh gives the impression of not having a master plan in terms of residential and commercial developments, streets, street lights and signage, trash containers, and other aspects of visual identity. Furthermore, several inadequacies in comparison to other cities were highlighted by focus group participants. These include:

- a lack of affordable housing and mixed-use areas throughout the city;
- a lack of places to sit and enjoy the city;
- a lack of public art;
- increasingly expensive housing inside the beltline;
- the need for a greater concentration of citizens living in the downtown area; and
- the need for more bike paths.

Many participants in the focus groups felt it important to emphasize that Raleigh impressed them as a friendly and family-oriented city with a good quality of life. It was noted that mixed-use developments, such as North Hills, are sprouting in the city, which is viewed as an improvement to the quality of life in urban areas. Improvements are being made to Fayetteville Street and the downtown area, stimulating a revival of sorts in the central part of the city. In addition, Raleigh has some beautiful suburbs.

Others pointed out that although Raleigh seems not to have a uniform identity, there is a presence of architectural diversity, and that many neighborhoods in Raleigh have unique identities. Overall, Raleigh compares favorably with many other U.S. and foreign cities, and sells itself well, but must strive to maintain its good qualities while controlling growth and accommodating the influx of migrants to the city and the surrounding area. It is clear from these focus groups that many individuals have high expectations of Raleigh, and want it to become a city that prides itself in orderly and responsible development.

### **Most Positive Aspects of Raleigh's Appearance**

Focus group participants identified many positive aspects of Raleigh's appearance. The overwhelming consensus among participants was that Raleigh is headed in the right direction with the emphasis on downtown revitalization and the variety of new residential and commercial developments in many parts of the city. Discussions also included frequent mention of formal efforts by the city to regulate and enhance those things that impact appearance directly. In addition, places in Raleigh that add to the vibrant nature of the city were identified in the discussions. Mentioned most often in the discussions as generally positive features of Raleigh's appearance were the following:

- beautiful and older neighborhoods (Cameron Park, Five Points, Mordecai, Historic Oakwood, Boylan Heights, etc.);
- historic buildings, historic preservation, and fine architecture;
- the street layout, facilitating mobility around the city;
- the streetscape in the downtown area; and
- the trees, greenway system, and parks system, enhancing the natural beauty of the area.

A number of other positive aspects of Raleigh's appearance were mentioned in the discussions. They tend to emphasize initiatives that are working well and seem to have wide appeal within the community. They also rely on policies and/or regulations to maximize their impact while responding to desires of the citizenry. Those features relating directly to appearance issues include the following:

- billboard regulations;
- directional signage is plentiful and helpful;
- efforts to minimize graffiti;
- emphasis on open spaces;
- parking lot regulations;
- regulations guiding new development;
- sense of safety due to police presence; and
- tree preservation program.

Several places in Raleigh were identified in the discussions as contributing considerably to the quality of life and the character of the city, and demonstrate the city's willingness to invest in itself. These places all together provide cultural, educational, entertainment, and basic services to satisfy a host of needs and desires of local citizens, as well as individuals from throughout the Triangle area. It is also expected that the new convention center will add tremendous excitement to the downtown area of Raleigh. The following list includes places that were frequently mentioned during the focus group discussions:

- downtown Raleigh and the State government complex (Fayetteville St., Progress Energy Center for the Performing Arts, State Capitol building, Governor's Mansion and garden, Legislative Building, etc.), offering cultural and entertainment opportunities;
- Glenwood South is vibrant and alive with a number of food and entertainment establishments;
- institutions of higher education (Meredith College, Shaw University, St. Augustine's College, N.C. State University, Peace College, etc.), providing tremendous learning opportunities;
- N. C. Museum of Art and campus and other area museums, adding cultural activities for locals and visitors;
- North Hills Mall and Plaza, Cameron Village Shopping Center, Falls Village Shopping Center, and Triangle Town Center, providing wonderful shopping experiences;
- Pilot Mills exhibits fine mixed-use characteristics; and
- the Dorothea Dix property has great potential, particularly as an open space or park.

### **Raleigh's Most Pressing Appearance Issues**

The most pressing appearance issues in Raleigh revolve around roads needing repair, trash along streets and roadways, unkempt street medians and sidewalk areas, and insufficient or unattractive landscaping along most gateways into the city. There are some who also feel that the city should: be more responsive to appearance related problems or issues; toughen regulations and policies regarding condition of rental properties and appearance of individual residential properties; and strengthen

enforcement of regulations governing residential and business areas. Specific issues mentioned during the discussions were numerous and covered almost every conceivable aspect of the city's appearance. For the sake of organization, these issues have been categorized into several major groups, as follows: land and open spaces; streets, roadways, and related areas; residential and commercial development; and miscellaneous.

Specific issues in the category of land and open spaces address issues related to water, sewers, parks, landscaping, trees, and so on. As a whole, these issues affect the quality of the outdoor environment, including the visual and interactive aspects. Major issues in this category are as follows:

- lack of compatible maintenance schedules and emphasis regarding grass mowing, trash pickup, etc., between the city and N.C. Department of Transportation work crews;
- lack of park maintenance;
- need for low impact landscaping that minimizes disturbance to the environment;
- need for more open space;
- need for preservation of natural settings and wetlands;
- need to strengthen tree protection ordinances and improve pruning processes;
- sewer easement clearing; and
- storm water runoff and water pollution.

The category of streets, roadways, and related areas address concerns that affect mobility and interconnections within the city. These issues also impact impressions gained during initial entry into the city, by those in daily contact with parts of the city, and by others passing through the city. Major issues in this category are as follows:

- education of homeowners and businesses regarding the process for getting streets repaired or improved;
- lack of connectivity between neighborhoods and downtown;
- lack of coordination between public agencies, city, county, and state, regarding enforcement of litter laws and other issues;

- need for better maintenance of railroad right-of-ways and adjoining property;
- need for connected sidewalks and related improvements;
- need to make streets more attractive;
- road widening projects and related improvements detract from the appearance of Southeast Raleigh;
- severe potholes and poor roads;
- too many Jersey barriers;
- unattractive gateways into the city (Capital Blvd., South Saunders St., New Bern Ave., Glenwood Ave./70 North, Hillsborough St., Hammond road, Garner Road, etc.); and
- use of Rock Quarry Road and I-440 interchange as a staging area for highway construction and maintenance.

Residential and commercial development issues tend to arouse a lot of attention, primarily because of the economic scale that is oftentimes involved. In many instances, personal property can also be affected, further sensitizing these issues or problems and the possible solutions. Nonetheless, the city's appearance can be greatly enhanced if these issues are dealt with appropriately and in the best interest of Raleigh as a whole. Major issues in this category are as follows:

- excessive number of strip malls and corresponding lack of appropriate landscaping;
- Garner Rd. industrial area needs to be cleaned up and redeveloped;
- improve downtown parking;
- inappropriate infill in residential areas, such as McMansions, and lack of strong infill standards;
- large number of unattractive and empty, big box storefronts;
- need for preservation of historic neighborhoods;
- need more affordable housing, especially in and around downtown;
- Person St. area needs reviving;
- proposed high-rise at Glenwood Ave. and Creedmoor Road (Soleil Center) should be in the downtown area;
- urban sprawl and associated traffic problems; and

- vacant buildings downtown need tenants or new owners.

A number of pressing miscellaneous issues related to Raleigh's appearance surfaced during the focus group discussions. Paramount among these issues was the need to educate citizens regarding appearance policies and regulations. It was believed that education would go a long way toward improving Raleigh's appearance where private property was concerned, both in residential and commercial areas. Other miscellaneous issues were of a public nuisance nature or concerned generally unattractive situations or sites, including:

- areas of very visible poverty, homeless people, and panhandlers;
- Central Prison (unattractive and depressing);
- overhead utility lines, crooked utility poles, and unsightly transformers; and
- Watson Flea Market area (traffic hazard, unattractive, and a source of pollution to ground water).

#### **Raleigh's most attractive location, site, or area**

A number of locations, sites, or areas were identified as very attractive for a number of reasons. Some sites were identified because of mixed-use characteristics, while others were singled out because of attractive design concepts or apparent efforts at high quality maintenance. In addition, many of these sites were included earlier in this summary in describing Raleigh's overall appearance and its most positive aspects. The entire parks system and greenways, flowers planted along the interstate, and the historic districts are all considered very attractive. In the downtown area, focus group participants identified all of the following as being very attractive:

- Capitol Square/State Government Complex, including the Governor's Mansion;
- Fayetteville St.;
- Moore Square;
- N. C. Museum of History;
- N. C. Museum of Natural Sciences; and
- Progress Energy Center for the Performing Arts.

Some of the areas identified as most attractive were adjacent to downtown, including: Estey Hall at Shaw University; the Blount St. development, a nice mixed-use area; and older neighborhoods near downtown, such as Historic Oakwood, Mordecai, and Boylan Heights. As well, the view of the downtown area from South Saunders St. and the McDowell St. gateway into the city and downtown were both mentioned for their attractive attributes. Away from the downtown area, a number of attractive locations were identified for their outdoor appeal and/or natural beauty, including the Dorothea Dix property, the J. C. Raulston Arboretum, open space behind the N. C. Museum of Art, the Old Lassiter Mill Road area, and the pedestrian bridge over the beltline at Wade Avenue.

Other attractive locations identified include: educational and cultural settings; shopping, entertainment, and mixed use areas; and areas that have been improved with landscaping, etc. The educational and cultural settings identified include:

- Broughton High School;
- Meredith College;
- N. C. Museum of Art;
- N. C. State University, including Centennial Campus and College of Veterinary Medicine (resembles a small city and is pedestrian friendly);
- Peace College; and
- Saint Mary's School.

The shopping, entertainment, and mixed-use areas identified include:

- Cameron Village;
- Five Points;
- Glenwood South;
- North Hills Mall;
- Pilot Mills; and
- RBC Center.

The areas that have been improved with landscaping, curbing, and paving, and/or are well maintained include:

- Durant Road;
- Glenwood Ave. and St. Mary's St. inside the I-440 beltline;
- Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard;
- New Bern Ave. gateway near WakeMed Raleigh Campus; and
- Western Boulevard.

**Raleigh's least attractive location, site, or area**

Several locations were identified as least attractive by focus group participants. The northern part of Capital Boulevard was mentioned more often than any other area because of the strip malls, vehicular traffic, and sprawl. The gateways into the city were also frequently mentioned as nearly all needing improvements or maintenance, as were the railroad right-of-ways. Narrow traffic lanes on Falls of the Neuse Rd. and Atlantic Ave. were also referred to as traffic hazards in need of attention.

Other locations identified as least attractive fell into the following categories: commercial areas; mixed-use (residential and commercial) areas; and buildings and related structures. The least attractive commercial areas identified include:

- Capital Blvd. and Wake Forest Road intersection and area;
- Crabtree Valley Mall area (cluttered and dangerous to pedestrians);
- N. C. State Fairgrounds;
- northern part of Glenwood Ave. coming into Raleigh;
- parking lots of big box retailers (frequently dirty and uninviting);
- Peace St. between Peace College and Glenwood Ave.;
- South Blount St. south of Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.;
- South Wilmington St. and South Saunders St. near the beltline (too many warehouses, vacant storefronts, and used car lots, and a high concentration of homeless people); and
- strip malls at various locations throughout the city.

The least attractive mixed-use areas identified include:

- Atlantic Ave. south of Spring Forest Road;

- Caraleigh;
- Hillsborough St. from fairgrounds to Meredith College area and across from N. C. State University;
- Old Garner Road and the connecting brownfield area;
- Watson Flea Market and surrounding Rock Quarry Road area; and
- Western Blvd. between I-440 and Pullen Park.

The least attractive buildings and related structures identified include:

- Amtrak train station and Greyhound bus station (unattractive and in need of better lighting);
- Barbwire fence around southern edge of Shaw University (very unsightly);
- Central Prison is unattractive, particularly on the Morgan St. side;
- Centennial Campus at N. C. State University (uninspired architecture); and
- Legislative Building and other State Government Complex buildings (poor architecture).

### **Single Effort or Initiative to Improve Raleigh's Appearance**

Focus group participants were asked to take into account the balance between public/private value and public/private cost in identifying a single effort or initiative that would do the most to improve Raleigh's appearance. In doing so, a number of ideas were put forward. Mentioned most often among these ideas was improving or strengthening enforcement of current regulations related to appearance issues and preserving the environment. Mentioned next most often was the idea of the city offering incentives or awards to: attract businesses downtown; seek high quality, distinctive architecture in new buildings; encourage redevelopment of depressed areas; motivate property upgrades; encourage low impact development; and promote neighborhood beautification.

A number of other suggestions for improving Raleigh's appearance related to policies, environment, infrastructure and safety, and miscellaneous ideas. Some of the specific suggestions relating to policies include the following:

- consider moving certain public entities from downtown to other locations in order to capitalize on the use of higher valued downtown property (e.g. Wake County Courthouse, Wake County Detention Center, etc.);
- develop aesthetic ordinances similar to those found in other cities;
- do more to promote downtown;
- encourage creative design and best management practices in new developments and redevelopment areas;
- focus more on the whole city rather than particular areas when making decisions;
- impose stiffer penalties for absentee landlords who don't maintain their property;
- improve consistency of maintenance standards among state and local agencies;
- improve coordination among agencies that influence the appearance of the city;
- slow the pace of development and better manage growth;
- start initiative to encourage local, small business owners to invest in the city; and
- use inmate labor to improve the city's appearance.

Specific suggestions relating to the environment include the following:

- coordinate the streetscape for downtown as a whole;
- develop a city-wide campaign to promote public and private property maintenance and beautification;
- improve appearance of Hillsborough St. between Faircloth St. and Morgan St., including roundabouts;
- improve gateways into the city;
- improve landscaping and related maintenance along major thoroughfares; and
- increase park maintenance efforts.

Specific suggestions relating to infrastructure and safety include the following:

- bury utility lines underground whenever practical;
- create easier access to downtown;
- create more bike paths to encourage biking;
- improve connectivity among areas of the city (vehicular and pedestrian);
- improve directional signage;

- improve lighting to increase safety and ambiance;
- install emergency call stations around the city to increase feelings of safety;
- invest in more pedestrian bridges;
- provide free parking downtown and improve parking signage;
- replace street lighting with more attractive and coordinated fixtures; and
- use more roundabouts and speed bumps to deal with traffic issues.

Miscellaneous suggestions for improving Raleigh's appearance include the following:

- develop a unified vision of the city with input from all stakeholders;
- elect more responsible officials;
- encourage citizens to contact local government agencies regarding appearance issues, such as trash, junk cars, etc.;
- improve education of residents regarding regulations pertaining to private property maintenance;
- integrate the area that includes Hillsborough St. and N. C. State University (streetscape, etc.); and
- provide assistance to older neighborhoods to facilitate property maintenance and upgrades.

### **Conclusions**

The vast majority of focus group participants rated the overall appearance of Raleigh as good to very good in comparison to other cities visited or lived in. The most positive aspects of Raleigh's appearance centered around downtown revitalization and the variety of new residential and commercial developments in many parts of the city. Formal efforts by the city to regulate and enhance those things that impact appearance directly were also frequently mentioned during the discussions.

Roads needing repair, trash along streets and roadways, unkempt street medians and sidewalk areas, and insufficient or unattractive landscaping along most gateways into the city were identified most often as the most pressing appearance issues. In addition, the city should: be more responsive to appearance related problems or issues; toughen regulations and policies regarding condition of rental properties and

appearance of individual residential properties; and strengthen enforcement of regulations governing residential and business areas.

Raleigh's most attractive locations, sites, or areas were identified because of mixed-use characteristics, attractive design concepts, or apparent efforts at high quality maintenance. Some of the locations included were: the entire parks system; buildings or areas downtown; buildings or areas adjacent to downtown; educational and cultural settings; shopping, entertainment, and mixed use areas; and areas that have been improved with landscaping, etc. Focus group participants identified the northern part of Capital Boulevard as the least attractive location because of the strip malls, vehicular traffic, and sprawl. Also frequently mentioned as nearly all needing improvements or maintenance were the gateways into the city and the railroad right-of-ways.

Finally, focus group participants were asked to identify a single effort or initiative that would do the most to improve Raleigh's appearance while taking into account the balance between public/private value and public/private cost. Among the ideas suggested, the following were mentioned most often: improving or strengthening enforcement of current regulations related to appearance issues and preserving the environment; and offering incentives or awards to impact appearance and development issues.

## ***APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP SESSION DATES***

Session #1 – May 1, 2006

Session #2 – August 24, 2006

Session #3 – August 30, 2006

Session #4 – September 11, 2006

Session #5 – September 13, 2006

Session #6 – September 20, 2006

Session #7 – September 26, 2006

## **APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

1. How do you rate Raleigh's overall appearance, in comparison to other cities which you have visited or in which you have lived? (Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor)
2. What do you think are the most positive aspects of Raleigh's appearance? Why?
3. What do you think are Raleigh's most pressing appearance issues? Why?
4. What do you consider Raleigh's most attractive location, site or area? What makes it that way?
5. What do you consider Raleigh's least attractive location, site, or area? What makes it that way?
6. Keeping in mind potential costs involved, what single effort or initiative do you think would do the most to improve Raleigh's appearance?